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Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II)

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HABITAT II

JORGE WILHEIM, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), reviews the problems facing modern human habitation. Small and large cities alike need good management to cope with rising demands on housing and services. Armed conflicts have destroyed cities and left millions of people refugees, without adequate shelter. Traffic is also a major problem for a number of cities around the world. Poverty is an aspect of social unfairness which affects both urban and rural populations. Mr. Wilheim stresses that we are living through a difficult period of transition, and the solutions for problems that society faces today are to be found in the cities of the world. The Habitat II Conference will seek these solutions in an examination of today's cities.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Due to the rapidly increasing world population, many communities lack proper housing and suffer from deteriorating living conditions. Today there are more than a billion people around the world living in inadequate shelter -- without water, electricity, roads, health facilities, and, in most cases, without the security of tenure. More than a hundred million people are quite literally homeless. To deal with these human tragedies and to work to find solutions for these global issues, the world community has decided to convene the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, or Habitat II.

Our guest today has a particular interest in the issue of human habitation. He is Jorge Wilheim, Deputy Secretary-General of Habitat II. Joining me to talk with Mr. Wilheim are Ricardo Alday of the Mexican News Agency and Raghida Dergham of *Al-Hayat* of London. Mr. Wilheim, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

WILHEIM: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Wilheim, you are, I believe, from São Paolo; Ricardo here is from Mexico City. Mexico City is the largest city in the world, I believe, population-wise, and São Paolo is second. Here in New York we're a village by comparison. Is there a desirable limit for cities? Do urban planners feel that beyond a certain level of population a city becomes just totally unmanageable, and that it's therefore desirable to keep populations below that level?

WILHEIM: I wouldn't say that there is a limit or an ideal size of a city. We can have good cities and well-managed large cities and badly-managed small cities. But of course, if the size of a city goes to beyond a mega-city size, with more than 10, more than 15, more than 20 million population, the whole problem of managing, the whole problem of having the participation of population gets a lot more difficult. So there is no ideal size. And even if there were an ideal size, we don't control the size of cities. They are what they are, and we should do something about it. And with those that are already large -- such as New York City, Mexico City, São Paolo or Tokyo -- and those cities that are growing very fast, as in Africa and Asia, yes, for those cities that are not yet large, planners should work on alternative ideas, and nations, governments, should have urban policies in order to establish a better and more balanced network of cities.

DERGHAM: Have you measured what is the worst-managed city and the best-managed city so that you know where one is at the lower point and at least aspiration for a higher point? Do we know that, worst-managed, best-managed?

WILHEIM: Yes. I wouldn't rate them, because it would be offensive perhaps, but of course there are cities that are very well managed and very creative in which life and urban issues are dealt with in a better way. I would say that in Brazil, for instance, Curitiba is a well-managed city.

LITTLEJOHNS: What's the population there?

WILHEIM: It is almost 2 million. And other cities of the same size are not well managed.

DERGHAM: And the same country, you mean.

WILHEIM: And even in the same country.

DERGHAM: So then it could be a problem of the city itself, not the government. Where is the blame, then? If both cities are in the same country, is it local authority, or is it the government?

WILHEIM: No, it is local authorities and also the local spirit. And these things sometimes are linked. There are cities in which, both for traditional reasons or because the local authorities were capable of steering, there is a civic engagement of the population, and the love of the population for their cities makes it easier to manage and to make innovations and to live better. It doesn't solve all social problems, of course, because social problems are not local, they are probably national. But anyhow, you can manage it in different ways. So it depends also on the skills of local authorities, and it depends on the spirit of its population.

ALDAY: Is there a way to establish a balance in the development of rural and urban settlements?

WILHEIM: Well, even if a balance is established, in the sense that you don't have disasters in the country -- in agriculture in the rural sector -- and therefore a huge sudden migration to cities, even if this does not occur, it is the trend to have to produce in agriculture with less people than in the past. So even if we have a balanced development, national development, and good agriculture and some employment in the rural sector, still the trend is for part of this population to go to the cities. Now, there are several differences from country to country. In the case of Brazil we have an agricultural frontier. There is still space to be conquered by agriculture. In other countries you don't have the frontier, but you have problems of land tenure. And so there are, of course, natural contexts to be considered.

DERGHAM: I was going to try to find out a little further about the best and worst managed cities. You spoke only of two cities in one country -- Brazil. Can we go beyond, can we go into different continents? Can we speak -- I know you don't want to offend other particular governments, but, you know, this is the whole idea, awareness, I suppose -- this is why you're holding conferences. Give us an idea of the worst-managed city and why.

WILHEIM: Worst?

DERGHAM: Yes.

WILHEIM: Well, I don't want to offend anyone, but of course there are cities that are much more problematic. The traffic in Bangkok is a case study of either bad management or bad -- or, anyhow, a problem. Even in Seoul, which is not badly managed, traffic is getting very, very hectic. The problem and solution of traffic and the problems of the private car are not solved in Seoul just as they're not solved in Tokyo, and they are not solved in Bangkok, either. From the point of view of sanitation, we have several cities in India that have very bad sanitary conditions.

DERGHAM: And Africa, what's the main problem in Africa, for example?

WILHEIM: Well, Africa is not yet a very urbanized continent. Most of the people live in the rural sector.

LITTLEJOHNS: But Cairo is one of the larger cities.

WILHEIM: Yes. I was really thinking of sub-Saharan Africa; you're right. And some cities -- yes, of course, Cairo is a very big metropolis too. And in the case of Africa, I would say that the main problems are, first of all, the fact that in sub-Saharan Africa countries are not nations. And this makes it very difficult to instill that spirit, that civic spirit that I was mentioning before.

DERGHAM: So here is the problem with the very concept of your Conference on Habitat. Actually you have two themes, two overall themes: one is adequate shelter for all, which is not a problem, we'll get to that later; and then you have sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world. So how do you deal with a problem with, let's say, nomadic life or non-civic life in the sense that you are approaching it as an overall, yet it doesn't fit in that overall you're talking about?

WILHEIM: You are speaking of nomadic in the sense of real nomadic, or migrations?

DERGHAM: Either in the sense of nomadic or migrations, or as you just mentioned that the civic life as you define civic is not so existent in the continent of Africa.

WILHEIM: Yes, well, this makes it more difficult. I would say that the problem of migration is a contemporary problem, not only because of the population that goes from the rural sector to the urban sector -- that has always happened in history -- but in the last five or six years we've had in the whole world more than 80 armed conflicts, and a lot of cities were destroyed, and people died. And as a result of this, we have 15 million refugees in the world, plus the natural migrations that are caused by all these conflicts. And migrations mean not only what you were saying, that the civic engagement is more difficult, but they mean new stress in many existing cities. And this is one feature of our time. You have important old cities in Europe or in the United States that receive an enormous amount of foreigners, immigrants that come to make a new life there. And of course this is enriching the local culture, but this

enrichment goes through stress and tension. And this is one of the aspects that is more typical of urban life nowadays.

ALDAY: I wanted to ask you, on the political side, are these policies of neo-liberalism and structural reform promoted by many governments in Latin America and in many developing countries by the Bretton Woods institutions, are they making any good in this whole situation, or are they not?

WILHEIM: Well, I have a personal point of view on the future of neo-liberalism. I think this is a very short, short life.

ALDAY: Why?

WILHEIM: Because I think the structural changes in society that we are going through at this end of the century are deeper, are more profound. Society is changing, and it is not only -- the neo-liberal wave is the reaction against a very state-planned and state-managed regime. And it's understandable, it's good, but it's unstable, and it is not the pattern of the next century, in my point of view.

ALDAY: So it's a transition period.

WILHEIM: It is, indeed. I always say that we are living in a transitional period of history.

ALDAY: To where?

WILHEIM: Well, we don't know to where. Probably to a new renaissance and a new kind of life in the next century. I don't have the design for it, but I see clearly the symptoms of structural change.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Wilheim, you mentioned the effect of immigration on cities. As you probably know, there's a big debate going on in the United States about immigration and whether it's gotten out of hand, whether too many people are being admitted as permanent residents of this country. Do urban planners feel that immigration should be controlled as a factor in helping cities survive and be more easily managed?

WILHEIM: No, I don't know about planners in general, but I would say that I would prefer not. It not only --

LITTLEJOHNS: You would prefer not to have controls?

WILHEIM: Not to have controls. Migration is a culturally-enriching process. The United States has always gained with migrations, and they will go on gaining with migrations, although the process is not a calm and smooth one. It is a difficult situation. And this creates much of the urban tension, and even violence comes from the intolerance that is brought on by the fact that things are changing and people feel insecure. And to face migrants with all the drive that a migrant has to make a new living in a new country, all this increases tensions and also increases intolerance, selfishness and violence.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you would say that the immigrants are being made scapegoats for social problems.

WILHEIM: Sometimes they are scapegoats; sometimes they are not being made scapegoats, but the problem is still there.

DERGHAM: I'd like to go into another direction in terms of migration. What about forced migration? What about the flood of refugees, people being forced to leave their countries? And let's say we have different types of refugee problems. Actually, on the increase, we have the traditional old Palestinian refugee problem, and we have Rwanda refugees. We have an exacerbation of the situation of forced migration. How do you think of that in terms of planning?

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Wilheim, before you answer that question, this is World Chronicle. Our guest is Jorge Wilheim, Deputy Secretary-General of the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements.

WILHEIM: Well, I think you are tackling one of the most dramatic problems of our days. Even at the Conference we are talking about the future of cities. But what if we are destroying cities in all those conflicts I was mentioning before? This is a very peculiar and important situation for the United Nations, because most of these refugees are being protected by the United Nations; this makes for a lot of the budget of the United Nations, protecting all these refugees. So the fact that we are going through a transitional period of history makes the dangers of localized conflicts and nationalisms and evictions one of the symptoms of change.

DERGHAM: But you're telling me you're not planning to do anything about it, this is not on your agenda. I'll press you a little bit on this Conference now and what you really are going to do. So permit me --

WILHEIM: No, it is on the agenda, it is on the agenda. And this is why the problem of peace was brought up in the last prepcom, in Nairobi, by countries as one of the principles we should tackle.

DERGHAM: And then again, if a conference is going to bring peace, then we all should rest and not do anything about it. But in reality, there is a conference to be held. A lot of countries will be participating. It's not clear to me what it is for. Is it to raise public awareness internationally and nationally? Or is it to target governments to do something about it? I'm not clear on pragmatically what the Conference is all about.

WILHEIM: Well, I'll try to clarify. Cities are the place where most of the world population lives, and although this is very clear for each citizen, it is quite invisible from the point of view of central governments. The relationship between central governments and local authorities is not only not clear, but very often central governments do not have a holistic, comprehensive understanding of what a city is. Theirs is a sectoral view of cities. Central

governments look at transport, at housing, as if these things could be separated one from the other, and we lose the richness of what cities can be and the importance of cities in a world of cities where more than 50 per cent of the world population is living -- and more in the future -- and which are the real core of the solutions of this transitional period. Things will change in cities before they change in the rest of the country. The governance and management of cities will find new ways of solving problems, through partnership action, before central governments can find a way of doing it in the countries as a whole. So there are not only problems that are concentrated in cities, there are solutions that are found in cities. And this is what our Conference is about. We want to create awareness of the fact that cities are important for society, that in a transitional period of history we find solutions more quickly in cities than elsewhere, and this is what we want to discuss.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why is it you find solutions more quickly in cities than elsewhere?

WILHEIM: Well, probably because citizens exert more effective pressure on local authorities than on central governments. If you have a problem that is not being solved in a district, in a part, in a street of your city, the population gets organized, they put pressure on the mayor and they find a solution more easily. You cannot think that you can solve all the problems of our life by first solving all the problems of the nations, of development, then coming down to a region, then coming down to a state and then finally to a city to find the solution. It's the other way around.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the huge so-called underclass in cities itself contributes to the problem. If you didn't have these enormous cities with a huge underclass the problems would not be so acute.

WILHEIM: This is theoretical. You already have the cities. And if you have this underclass and poverty, it's not because they live in cities. You see them because they live in cities. But they would exist elsewhere if the city did not exist. The main issue --

LITTLEJOHNS: But they can cope more easily in an agrarian society than they can in an urban one.

WILHEIM: No, they would die of hunger in an agrarian society because they would not have access to the land, and because you don't need so many people on the land -- you don't have employment on the land. A city is still the core of opportunities. This is why people go to cities. They know what they do, they don't leave the cities. And if there is poverty, poverty is not a class, it's not a fatality, it's not a destiny, it is just a social aspect of social unfairness, injustice. And this is a national problem to be solved.

ALDAY: So how do you make these opportunities sustainable?

WILHEIM: Well, I would say that the sustainability -- and this is one of the things that we are discussing in the preparations for the Conference in Istanbul -- the sustainability should

be looked at, and sustainability means to give a future to the process of development, not to create economic growth that cannot be developed tomorrow. And this means that you must protect natural resources on one hand, but on the other hand, to make social development exist, you must also protect your human resources. And this brings along an amplification of the concept of sustainability of development: It is the protection of human resources as well as of ecology and natural resources.

DERGHAM: In your literature you say that urban poverty is rising at an alarming pace, especially among women. You also say that women and men use and experience cities differently according to their roles, responsibilities and access to resources. Would you care to explain why, and how you're going to handle that at the Conference? Is it going to be targeted particularly, this poverty reflecting on women?

WILHEIM: Yes, we intend to do it because we want to think of a gendered city. There are different ways of looking at life and looking at cities. And it is very enriching if you consider the urban problems as they are seen by the male sector, the male part of society, and by the female. All planners that have had some experience know what it means to discuss housing, to discuss urban problems with organizations that are led by women or that are led by men. There are different approaches, and they are legitimate; both are legitimate. So it is very enriching to have a gendered look at urban problems.

I remember that when I worked in my city, in São Paolo, making a plan of São Paolo, we discussed and had public debates very, very often as a method of work. And the leadership of all the popular associations dealing with urban problems -- the districts, the streets, and housing -- usually they were women, and very knowledgeable, very active.

DERGHAM: What about homelessness? Michael spoke about literally 1 million homeless in the world. Is the majority women? Is this a gender problem? At least in New York we see more homeless women on the rise. I don't know how it is in the rest of the world. How does the gender play in the numbers of homelessness? Is it families, is it --

WILHEIM: Well, what happens is there are many families in the world where the man is not there. It's only the mother, --

LITTLEJOHNS: Single mothers.

WILHEIM: -- single mothers with children. And in some countries they have much difficulty acquiring legal land tenure and legal access to housing and to credit. Women do not have the same credit at banks that men have in many countries of the world. And this is a huge problem.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Wilheim, your office is in Nairobi, Kenya, and we've read in the press for some time now about problems of corruption in Kenya and, I presume, in Nairobi

itself. Is corruption a major problem for cities world-wide, or is it a relatively rare phenomenon?

WILHEIM: No, it is very common. It happens in Tokyo; it happens in Germany; it happens in the United States; it happens in Africa and Latin America -- it is a world-wide problem. And this is very much linked to what I was saying before, that we are living through a transitional period, and one of the characteristics of transitional periods is that people don't know what's right and what's wrong. And this is why we also want at the Conference to give a spiritual dimension to the problems that we are dealing with. Corruption is one problem. It is not only a managerial problem, of course, or an anti-democratic issue, it is also a moral issue and an ethical issue. And at this time we should also illuminate and be aware of the ethical problems.

ALDAY: Very quickly, can you tell us specifically how this Conference is going to deal with the issue of financial and economic resources to deal with the commitments or the objectives of the summit?

WILHEIM: Yes. This question of yours is very pertinent. We don't want to leave the financial problem to the end of the Conference, we are dealing with it this year in the preparation of the Conference. We are going to have several regional meetings and one big meeting in Washington with the World Bank on financing the city. You know, this is an important issue because money is not where it used to be. It used to be in governments and central banks, or in private banks. It's not there any more. More and more it is on the market, it just flows about above our heads, and governments cannot put their hands on this money. The whole balance of capital resources is different in the last five years. This makes it very difficult to plan, to have a budget, especially for public policies.

LITTLEJOHNS: And people of course object to paying taxes. Here in the United States the watchword is cut back on taxes.

WILHEIM: Yes, well, this is transition, of course. Nobody likes to pay. But you can't avoid it.

LITTLEJOHNS: You can't have services unless you pay taxes.

WILHEIM: But of course this means that to finance cities, just as to finance other public services, we must find where the capital sources are. And the balance, the blend of capital resources is different at the end of this century, and probably in the next century. So we must really find out how to finance, how to act to make social change and to make urban changes and transformations through a blend of resources that is not only public. We have many organizations nowadays that are not public, that you can't say whether they're public or private. What is a big hospital, a big university?

DERGHAM: I have one curious question. I know Istanbul, I've been to Istanbul, and I think it's a marvellous, beautiful city.

WILHEIM: It is.

DERGHAM: Why Istanbul, however? Why was Istanbul chosen as a site for this upcoming conference next summer? And why is it supposed to be a unique conference, a new epoch? We have a few moments for you to answer all this, but why Istanbul and why a new epoch?

WILHEIM: When the General Assembly decided to call this conference, they asked what country would host it, and Turkey came up and offered Istanbul. And I think it was a very good idea, because Istanbul is really very important, one of the big historic cities of the world, and it is very exciting to be there. Now, the other question you were saying? Why is it so different?

DERGHAM: The new epoch, yes.

WILHEIM: Well, it is different because we are living through a very, very -- what I said, a transitional period, a very interesting, creative and, if you wish, unpleasant period of history. The Conference will try to face these problems in a new way. It is a partnership Conference, it has some slight differences from other United Nations conferences. And the partners are all the stakeholders and the actors that change cities.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Wilheim, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Jorge Wilheim, Deputy Secretary-General of the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements. He was interviewed by Ricardo Alday of the Mexican News Agency and Raghida Dergham of *Al-Hayat* of London. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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